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ABSTRACT

An expanded duties role of the multiple-program evaluator as an integral part of the ongoing decision-making process in all projects served is defended. Assumptions discussed included that need for projects with related objectives to pool resources and avoid duplication of effort and the evaluator's unique ability to provide an objective communication conduit among such projects' administrative and field personnel. It is observed that evaluators already perform this function unofficially in many cases. The study concludes that such a function should be recognized as a legitimate and important part of the evaluator's role. (Author/RC)

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THE PROGRAM EVALUATOR'S ROLE IN CROSS-PROJECT POLLINATION

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Setting the Scene

As a research associate for the School District of Philadelphia, the author's job is to evaluate six to twelve federally funded projects in career and vocational education. Each of these projects is centrally administered, and may involve any number of schools between one and twenty-five, while any given school may be involved with as many as three or four such projects simultaneously. Project objectives relate predominantly to fostering career awareness and occupational skill development in students. While evalution activities are geared to both process and outcome objectives, this paper will present some observations and viewpoints related primarily to process considerations.

The author defends an expanded duties role of the multiple-project evaluator as both an interproject coordinator and an integral part of the on-going decision making process, in addition to his/her role as evaluator, for all projects served. While this role is not necessarily recommended for all educational evaluators, it is seen as an accomplished, though officially unrecognized, fact for those serving a multiplicity of functionally interrelated projects within one organization.

The Case for an Expanded Duties Role

By assuming an external, objective stance, the evaluator is often better able to observe project strengths, weaknesses, and duplication of effort than are project personnel with greater ego involvement in a project's success. It is therefore felt that the evaluator can best provide an objective communication conduit among the administrative and field personnel of projects whose similar or complementary objectives might better be achieved through either a coordination of effort or a refocusing of energy.

To this end, the Division of Priority Operations Evaluation Services of the Office of Research and Evaluation, School District of Philadelphia, has instituted an ongoing system of data feedback to project administrators concerning

both process and outcome issues. While this has led to a continuing examination of project objectives, methods, and achievements, informal evaluator feedback and input have often led to more immediate program revisions than are possible through existing formal channels. A sample of such interventions, for both individual and related projects, follows. (For further information see Chern et al, 1972,73,74.)

The author evaluated a project which provides small group career guidance to ninth-grade students. One group, seated in a circle, was observed participating in a variety of verbal activities for approximately 90 minutes. After 50 minutes, several students began to fidget, talk among themselves, and leave their seats. In a feedback session immediately following the activity, the evaluator, who initiated the feedback session, related this observation to the field personnel who revealed that they, too, had observed a waning of interest in the students, but were unprepared to deal with this except by cajoling students to continue in their participation. Alternatives were discussed, and it was agreed that activities involving physical movement would be incorporated into the counseling program, on the assumption that both the physical activity and a change of pace would help maintain student interest. Subsequent observations revealed that such activities were being used to a certain extent and were helping to keep interest high.

A second project evaluated by the author provides high school students with work experiences in hospital labs and clinics. The program is divided into a summer phase, during which students are paid a stipend for full-time work, and a school year phase, during which students work part time without remuneration. Most students remain in the program for the full year, working with the same hospital staff member, or preceptor. In the four years of the project's existence, there has generally been a lag of several months between the close of the summer phase and the start of the school year phase. This has been due to the time required to recruit new participants, staff vacations, and faulty communications

between school and hospital personnel. In 1974-75, the evaluator served unofficially as the project coordinator, contacting preceptors to determine whether their summer assistants had returned to work by October. They had not. He then informed the high school coordinator that students had not returned to their labs, although the preceptors were awaiting their return. By November, the old students had begun returning to "work," although a new group (to replace those who had graduated) had not yet been selected.

Without these two interventions by the evaluator, the projects would probably have continued to function on a less than optimal level.

The third example involves three projects emanating from three different departments within the system; all federally funded, with complementary if not similar objectives, and all located at the same school. Yet without the evaluator's unofficial intervention, none of these projects would have touched base with the other two in a manner which would allow each to serve as a resource for the others.

The first project involved 12 of the school's faculty members in weekly staff development sessions in which they were shown, and in which they discussed, methods of incorporating career decision making concepts and activities into their ongoing teaching and counseling programs.

The second project involved one teacher (also involved in the first project) in an out-of-school staff and curriculum development effort with other teachers in the same field. Its purpose was to revise the ninth grade Industrial Arts curriculum in such a manner as to emphasize the career development aspect of this area of instruction, incorporating elements of all academic disciplines as well.

The third project brought a combined hands-on and group counseling experience to the school's ninth grade students for three weeks. Its purposes were to foster greater career awareness and self awareness in relation to careers, in order to help students select a high school curriculum leading toward entry

into a career area of their choosing. (An instance of the group counseling phase of this project has been cited above.)

After observing the staff development and curriculum development projects for several months without observing any interaction between these two projects at the school, the evaluator asked the staff development participants how they had incorporated career decision making concepts and methods into their ongoing programs. Each participant enumerated ways in which this was being accomplished within the framework of his/her own area, except for the teacher participating in the curriculum development project. According to him, he was too busy working on the new curriculum to implement any aspect of career decision making in his classroom. (He was, however, being paid to attend the staff development sessions.) Ironically, career decision making was an integral concept in the new Industrial Arts curriculum. But neither this teacher nor the rest of the staff development group grasped the interrelatedness of these two projects, so that no attempt was made to use one as a resource or complement for the other.

Immediately at the evaluator's suggestion, the staff development group explored ways in which all could relate their own curricula to the Industrial Arts curriculum. Many parallels were uncovered in most of the subject areas represented, including English, Math, Social Studies, Science, Art, and counseling. Several participants subsequently observed activities in the Industrial Arts classroom, but no formal attempt was made to coordinate the two projects beyond the steps which have been described.

In the final example to be presented, the third project described (hands-on experiences combined with group career guidance) visited this school for a three-week period, addressing itself to all ninth grade students. The school served students in grades seven through nine; the staff development sessions involved

faculty members who worked with students in all three grades; and the Industrial Arts project was geared primarily to the ninth grade curriculum.

During a chat with the field supervisor of the hands-on/guidance project, before it visited this school, the evaluator asked whether any plans had been made to prepare the faculty for the project's arrival. It was learned that a request had been made to the principal to conduct a faculty orientation, and that project personnel were granted only a few minutes to accomplish this purpose during a weekly faculty meeting. The author then asked whether the supervisor had contacted the coordinator of the staff development project in an effort to have at least one session devoted to an orientation, as well as to assess the attitudes and knowledge of the staff development participants regarding career development issues in general and the hands-on/guidance project in particular. The supervisor replied that one informal communication had occurred, but that it had not been followed up. The supervisor agreed that such an arrangement might prove beneficial, but did not feel that she should be the one to initiate a contact with the staff development coordinator.

A similar communication took place between the evaluator and the staff development coordinator, revealing a similar reluctance on her part to initiate a contact with the supervisor. The writer intervened by personally phoning the coordinator from the supervisor's office, explaining to both that he felt it would be in the best interest of both programs, and hence the students served by both programs, if a cooperative venture were undertaken. (The representative of the curriculum project was also included in this joint venture by virtue of his participation in the staff development project.) A three-way phone discussion ensued, during which an arrangement was made for the hands-on/guidance staff to meet with the staff development group during a regularly-scheduled two-hour session.

During the joint session, numerous ways were explored in which all three projects represented could cooperate to achieve the common objectives of helping students gain career awareness and awareness of themselves in relation to careers. Subsequent observation revealed that such interproject cooperation ended as rapidly as it had begun.

Some Issues

It is hoped that the preceding descriptions of evaluator interventions have raised a number of issues in the reader's thoughts. Among these, the author considers the following important.

First, the project evaluator is probably in a better position to objectively assess the presence or absence of, or need for, articulation of efforts among projects with related goals.

Second, we must consider whether it is within the evaluator's jurisdiction to intervene directly into the ongoing activities of projects, either to facilitate the achievement of objectives or to coordinate efforts of a number of projects.

Third, we must consider whether, and under what circumstances, the evaluator can maintain objectivity while intervening in the day-to-day operations of projects being evaluated.

Fourth, at least two levels of process evaluation are implied. That described in the present paper places the evaluator in direct, ongoing interaction with project field personnel. The other level views the project evaluator as providing information to project personnel which must pass through the hands of the evaluator's superior(s) and the project administrator(s) before it reaches the field personnel of the projects being evaluated. The simple "tinker-toy"

diagram in Figure 1 can be used to illustrate the number and types of channels it is possible for evaluation information to take, from field observations back to field implementation. It becomes apparent that the less bureaucratized the communication pattern, the faster important evaluative information can be transmitted to the field, where it might lead to needed revision in implementation procedures.

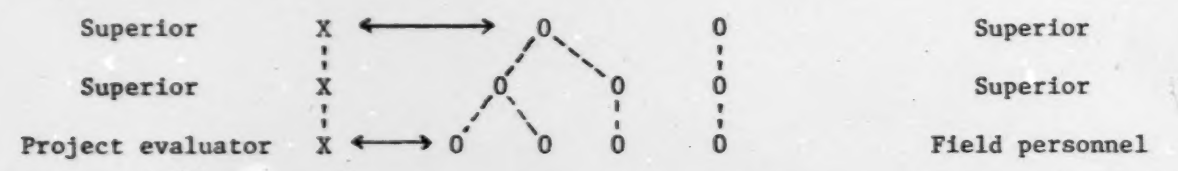

Figure 1. Diagram of existing communications channels between evaluation and project personnel.

Some Alternatives

The crux of the problem, as this author sees it, is the slowness in official communication of evaluation data which could prove instrumental in helping projects to become more effective, coupled with an unrealistically narrow conception of project evaluation in a large, multifaceted institutional setting.

In order to facilitate the flow of information from field observations back to field implementation, and thereby help programs make needed revisions in a hurry, this paper proposes that new roles and responsibilities be explored for evaluators working in large public school systems.

Evaluators serving any number of projects might have immediate and direct access to all administrators of those projects at all administrative levels, for the express purpose of feeding back information which may necessitate immediate project revision. In cases where an evaluator is serving several functionally related or complementary projects operating under different hierarchies or

branches of the same hierarchy, the evaluation strategy might be designed so that a given time slot is reserved at regular intervals (e.g. weekly) during which the evaluator reports to key decision makers for all involved projects simultaneously. These reporting sessions could result in instant recommendations regarding needed revisions in schools or other locations in which the projects function.

A second evaluation strategy, complementing the first, would require that all project designs be reviewed by a task force composed of evaluation and project personnel, before being submitted as proposals for funding. The purposes of this review would be to consolidate overlapping efforts, increase emphasis on those project components which have demonstrated greatest effectiveness, de-emphasize or revise those which have not, and develop contractual guidelines for the use of each project in the field. These guidelines, which would be agreed to and signed by project, field, and evaluation personnel would clearly spell out the obligations and responsibilities of all involved parties. For example, the evaluator would agree to evaluate specific objectives in specific ways and report findings by specific dates. (While this system is already in use by the Office of Research and Evaluation, it does not come into play until after projects have already received funding.) Project officials would agree to provide specific resources to schools by specific dates, and principals would agree to provide specific supportive services for each project located in their schools by their request.

The two alternatives thus far proposed assume an interest and ability on the part of project and system officials to actively cooperate for the benefit of the students. Since political, financial, temporal, and other obstacles and presures often impede inter-hierarchical cooperation, a third alternative is proposed in an attempt to transcend the constraints imposed by the nature of the institution.

Ombudsmen or advocates could serve to promote optimal project utilization as well as the incorporation of projects demonstrated to be effective into on-going school programs. One advocate would oversee each functionally-related group of projects designated as high priority by administration, such as basic skills development, career education, and early childhood education. Advocates would report to someone high enough in the administration, under whose authority they would function, that they could move freely among all levels of all hierarchies administering related projects. It is viewed as essential that advocates have a strong research background, for they would propose recommendations on the basis of evaluation findings, current research evidence, and their own observations.

While it seems inefficient to create new positions in an already over-cluttered bureaucracy, these may be justified if they can serve as catalysts to promote more effective use of existing personnel and programs. The problem is that while sufficient resources already exist to implement necessary educational programs, the lack of communication and coordination among these resources prevents them from providing their services in a manner that would best facilitate learning. The alternatives proposed here seek to remedy the situation through extending the working definition of institutional research and evaluation to include developmental, planning, and intervention functions.

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